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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002683

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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: EVANGELICAL CHURCHES FIND PATH TO OFFICIAL
RECOGNITION BLOCKED

REF: BAGHDAD 1426

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Classified By: Acting Political Counselor William Roebuck for Reasons 1
.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) A key Iraqi Evangelical Church leader tells us that Evangelical Churches are unable to obtain official recognition from the GOI because of overly stringent registration requirements imposed by the non-Muslim Endowment, thus preventing these churches from conducting legally sanctioned marriages and baptisms. Officials from the non-Muslim Endowment admit that the registration bar has been set high, but they argue that their intent is to shield Iraq's Christian community from scrutiny that would be brought about by evangelical proselytizing. Leaders of Iraq's officially recognized churches express similar concerns and have expressed their intent to block the registration of Evangelical Churches. END SUMMARY.

The Quest and Criteria for Recognition

12. (C) On September 24, Poloff met with Pastor Maher Fouad Douad, the Secretary General of the Society of Evangelical Churches, to discuss his organization's concerns with respect to obtaining official government registration. Douad stated that his church, the New Testament Baptist Church, began holding regular services after the fall of the former regime in 2003 and currently has 40-50 parishioners. Douad stated that prior to 2003 he worked as a minister with the Presbyterian Church -- one of two Protestant Churches legally sanctioned as part of the 14 officially recognized Christian churches in Iraq -- but that the Presbyterians suspended his membership when he founded his own church. Since that time, Douad and other Evangelical church leaders have sought official recognition from the GOI so that they can perform legally sanctioned marriages, divorces, and baptisms.

13. (C) According to Douad, a number of Evangelical churches currently operate in the provinces of Baghdad, Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulemaniya including: the United Church, the Alliance Church, the Baptist Church, the Nazarene Church, the Apostolic Church, the Holy Spirit Church, and Holy Resurrection Church. Under Iraqi law, recognition of new churches falls under the authority of the non-Muslim Endowment. Daoud showed Poloff a letter dated April 13, 2004 that he had received from Non-Muslim Endowment Director Abdullah al-Naufali outlining the five criteria for registering a new church in Iraq. The criteria include: approval by the Bishops Council (i.e., the representatives of the 14 currently recognized churches), 500 members who are over the age of 18, a letter from each of the members stating that they are no longer members in any other church, that the founder of the church is Iraqi, and that the church agrees to respect all other religions. Douad expressed frustration that these requirements were virtually impossible to meet.

Similarly, Father Ghasan Yousif Audish of the Evangelical Church based in Erbil told Poloff in May that he has had difficulty registering his church in the KRG (reftel).

Opposition from Endowment and Established Churches

14. (C) Al-Naufali confirmed to Poloff that the Endowment had instituted the aforementioned criteria for the registration of new churches because it wanted to avoid the "chaos" of large numbers of new churches suddenly operating in Iraq after 2003. Al-Naufali stated that he had personally met with the heads of 18 different Evangelical Churches that were seeking recognition in Iraq. Al-Naufali's greatest fear with respect to the new churches was that they would begin to proselytize to Muslims and that any conversions they might succeed in making would only generate violence against Iraq's Christian community as a whole. The head of the Christian Endowment, Ra'ad Shammaa, expressed his opinion to Poloff that the new churches appearing in Iraq were NGOs and not really churches. Both al-Naufali and Shammaa also pointed out that Iraq already recognized two Protestant/Evangelical Churches -- the Presbyterians and Seventh Day Adventists -- and questioned the need for more.

15. (C) Christian religious leaders expressed opposition to the Evangelical Churches on the grounds that they only proselytize amongst fellow Christians and thus take parishioners from the established churches. On August 5, the head of the Bishops Council, Archbishop Avak Asadourian of the Armenian Orthodox Church, told Poloff that the established churches could not accept the presence of the Evangelicals and would "not allow them to be recognized." Similarly, Chaldean Bishop Shlaimon Wardouni expressed anger

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at the presence of the Evangelical Churches, claiming that they had ridden into Iraq on the back of American tanks. Wardouni was incensed by the case of a Christian woman who he claimed had been married in an Orthodox Church, but who had allegedly been granted a divorce and remarried by an Evangelical Church operating in Sulemaniya.

16. (C) COMMENT: It is clear that the Evangelical Churches in Iraq face an uphill battle in securing official recognition from the GOI given the hostility that they face from the established churches and the equal parts caution and skepticism shown them by the GOI. Some of the hostility may also stem from the much reduced presence of the Christian community in Iraq due to the displacements that have taken place since 2003. With a smaller community presence, the established churches may be extremely sensitive to the possibility that new churches might draw some of their remaining parishioners away. Given the influence of the established churches on the non-Muslim Endowment the criteria for registration are unlikely to be eased any time soon. END COMMENT.

HILL